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ABSTRACT

To adequately prepare students with mental impairments for community employment, their education must consider: perceptions held by their teachers, content of the curriculum, and quality of transitional services provided. Research shows discrepancies between the attitudes of special educators and of employers regarding the job skills that are needed for success. Special educators must modify training programs for students with mental impairments to incorporate job skills that employers consider critical. To develop a functional curriculum, teachers must address functionality (the key to which academic skills within a curriculum should be incorporated into a career education program). Since there is proven need for school curricula to be more relevant to the work world, educators must integrate the curriculum into community-based, work-related settings. Communication with employers is essential for enhancing transitions from school and focusing the curriculum toward jobs that exist within the community. This paper presents a five-step model that addresses this need by using transition services as a focal point to provide outcomes for both participating employers and student trainees. It includes outreach, job finding/market analysis, on the job training, followup, and evaluation. Special educators must remain consistent with the demands of the job market and employment programs, communicate with employers, focus the district's curriculum toward existing jobs, and become proficient in vocational training with an emphasis on employer-driven critical job skills. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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In as much as education has as its fundamental purpose to prepare all students to lead productive and fulfilling lives (Benz & Halpern, 1987; Siegel & Sleeter, 1991), it could be assumed that upon completion of their schooling students would be prepared to begin full-time competitive employment and/or to pursue other post-secondary options. However, in order for students with mental impairments to be adequately prepared for adult society, their education is dependent upon several factors. These factors include the (1) perceptions held by those who offer daily instruction; (2) content of the curriculum; and (3) quality of the transitional services provided.

Research has found educators possess positive attitudes toward the appropriateness of employment for students with moderate to severe mental impairments (Schmilken & Berkell, 1989). Indeed, significant research has contributed to the vocational knowledge base that has in turn raised expectations for secondary students with employment options (Wehman, 1990). However few studies have investigated whether educators and employers have similar views as to what job-related skills are necessary for successful employment and therefore, what job-related skills should be incorporated into the daily instruction of these students.

One study (McCrea, 1991) investigated the relationship between employers' perceptions and special educators' perceptions, as to which skills were most relevant to job success for individuals with mental impairments. The group of special educators consisted of graduate and undergraduate students who were working with students with mental impairments. Businesses which made up the employer group were selected based upon their past employment practices (hiring individuals with mental impairments) or their potential for hiring these individuals (based

on type of business and/or skills needed to be employed). Both groups ranked four categories (work-related, communication, personal, and social) which contained five job-related skills each. Comparisons were made between the groups. Results indicated the discrepancies as well as the similarities of each group's perceptions. Knowing that discrepancies exist, special educators have an obligation to modify the training programs of their students with mental impairments to incorporate those job skills that employers view as critical. Employers reported that for entry-level employees to be successful on the job, they should be able to:

1. get along well with others;
2. be dependable;
3. show an interest in the job;
4. follow directions;
5. communicate;
6. demonstrate efficiency;
7. show initiative;
8. adapt to new work situations;
9. understand the work routine/job knowledge
10. dress appropriately;
11. respond appropriately to supervisor correction (McCrea, 1991).

Before a functional curriculum can be developed, another very important aspect needs to be addressed, functionality. Functionality is the key to which academic skills within a curriculum should be incorporated into a career education program for students with mental impairments. Functionality consists of six characteristics. These are the skills:

1. necessary to prepare students to function in daily environments and have a high probability for need in future environments;
2. needed to allow students to reach their desired level of functioning most efficiently;
3. consisting of instructional materials and teaching activities that will be encountered in the students' normal environments;
4. consisting of criteria selected for determining mastery of skills are consistent with standards expected within the students' homes and community environments;
5. representing chronological age appropriate skill(s);
6. occurring in natural environments at natural occurring times within the day (Brolin, 1995; Clark & Kolstoe, 1995).

In summary, to be comprehensive curricula must include each aspect of functionality and instruction in the top ranked job skills necessary for entry-level employees to possess (based upon employers' perceptions).

Since there is a proven need for school curricula to become more relevant to the world of work, the challenge for educators is to integrate the curriculum in community-based work related settings. To accomplish this task, special educators must become or use employment specialists to: match students to jobs; analyze job sites; conduct on-site training; and stage situations at the job site that are difficult to demonstrate/replicate in a classroom setting (McCrea, 1993). It is well known that students with mental impairments do not generalize from one situation to another, therefore it is more practical to use the actual environment where the skill will be required (Rojewski, 1989; Wehman, 1990).

Communication with employers is especially critical to enhance transition and to focus the curriculum toward jobs that exist in the students' particular community. Thus a transition model must be community-based, consumer oriented and designed to enhance interaction between participating employers and student trainees to encompass the necessary ingredients for job success. The following five-step model (Miller & Hartwick, 1994) addresses this need by using transition services as a focal point to provide outcomes for both the participating employers as well as the student trainees.

The first step in this proposed model is that of "Outreach". This step involves identifying and "linking up" with a range of businesses and employers representative of the job market of the rural community. First, a Community Transition Team (CTT) is created consisting of state agencies such as VESID, Social Services, residential programs, the school district and business and community representatives. Once created, the CTT provides necessary input from

businesses regarding how to generate new jobs, recruits new job sites by providing information as well as tours of existing sites to potential new members, and improves existing markets by identifying and filling local employer needs.

The second step, the "Job Finding/Market Analysis" is directly related to the first step. With the CTT assisting in identifying, promoting and locating community employers to become involved in the training project, the training project is also developing a composite of the local job force and labor needs. This information allows the school district and local Office of Vocational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID) counselors to conduct assessments and compile portfolios of available jobs and training sites that the CTT can use to match employers with trainees. This step also includes a detailed job analysis of the minimum requirements and skills for each job. The ongoing market analysis provides the team with employment trends that can assist employers with labor shortages or other technical assistance.

The third step, "On the Job Training", is designed for the student to receive real life experience with an employer who has agreed to participate as a training site. The training for the student depends on his/her individual needs, the level of transition service identified by the CTT, and the number of years prior to a student's graduation. Training can be tailored to each student's specific needs and then matched to a job site that will work on specific student goals (i.e. social and / or behavioral skills, transportation, or job specific skills).

The fourth step consists of a "Follow-up" provided by CTT members. Follow-up involves an investigation of how each training site and student are performing based on the transition plan developed. The CTT team examines the implementation of services and integration of all aspects of the training. This step should be seen as separate from step five (evaluation) in that this follow-up is an ongoing process.

The last step in this model is that of "Evaluation". Evaluation occurs on several levels and involves both qualitative and quantitative information. This information will allow the CTT to determine the program's ability to meet the goals of the entire project including that of the employer, student and community. Once the CTT completes their review, the information is used as part of the first step (Outreach) to improve the linkage between community and school.

The information described in this article is twofold. First, it guides special educators in designing vocationally oriented curriculum based in functionality and inclusive of training needs identified by employers currently hiring individuals with disabilities. Secondly, it provides a strategy for initiating an effective on-the-job training program that meets the needs of students with disabilities while at the same time supporting local business communities' need for skilled workers.

The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA '97) will continue to guide the education and training of persons having a disability into the new millennium. IDEA '97 encourages full inclusion of students with disabilities into the workforce. This goal can only be accomplished educators continue to initiate conversations with employers and are willing to redesign the way they do business within the community.

Special educators should: (1) remain consistent with the demands of the job market; and employment programs; (2) communicate with potential employers; (3) focus/steer their district's curriculum toward those jobs which exist in their community and (4) become more proficient in vocational training with a focus on employer-driven critical job skills.

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